

*"I borrowed the full of our Shugar dish of shugar from her."*

*-Matthew Patten, March 13, 1781*



## THE PATTEN FAMILY SUGAR BOWL

On November 22, 1902, William Greenleaf Blunt stood on the doorstep of the de Young Museum located in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California. He stood there with a small wooden container, a maple burl covered sugar bowl. It looked old and not necessarily precious, a humble object by the considerations of most. Blunt's father had died five years earlier, his mother some years before that. William was also getting on in years and he and his wife, Rachel, had no children. He was a taxidermist by profession and understood the importance of preservation, of maintaining the past, both natural and artificial, for the study and appreciation by contemporary and future generations. The door to the museum opened and Blunt was greeted by a curator. As William told the story of the bowl, the curator listened and began to enter its details into the museum's catalogue books. The ledgers were laid out with specific field headers and ruled boxes: *Museum Number, Character of Object, Received From, When Received, Remarks*, etcetera. The story seemed to have more details than the ledger would allow, so just the essential details were recorded. As the door closed and William left the museum, so did the story of the sugar bowl. Its history would be lost for 100 years.

I first became aware of this maple burl sugar bowl in early August, 2001. Before leaving for Maine, which is home base for me during Antiques Week in New Hampshire, I made a routine check for burl on Ebay. A listing immediately caught my eye—one of those heart pounders. It was well photographed and more or less accurately described. The sellers were from San Francisco and went under the name “antiques-to-antiquities.” I noticed that the auction would end while I was away for Antiques Week. I figured this was a good thing, as most other dealers and collectors would also be in New Hampshire. Because of the timing and location of the sellers, I felt this piece had a good chance of flying under the radar.

When my wife and I arrived at my folk's house in Portland, I went straight to the computer. A number of bids were already recorded. It was not flying under the radar. The days passed and I anxiously awaited the auction closing date. These were the days before Esnipe and other programs that can automatically place a bid for you, so you had to be there at the closing if you really wanted to be a player.

I had determined that I really wanted this piece. From the form, reminiscent of Chinese export porcelain, I knew that it was 18th century, circa 1760 -1780 and likely of New England origin. The gentle raised foot lead into a well bellied bowl with delicate turnings and into a flared rim. The cover was carefully domed and had a pagoda-like finial. The figure of the wood lead me to conclude that it was likely made from a maple burl. The shellac appeared to be of the period. This was quite a find! The sellers had listed a photograph that showed an old collection label, but gave no additional information in their description about this label. I inquired about the label and they informed me that they had purchased it as a deaccession from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF) shortly after the 1989 earthquake, but had no additional information.

The final day of the auction came and then the final minutes. My fingers were sweating over the keyboard. I constantly refreshed the page to keep apprised of the bidding and to let the computer know that I was not idle (I was on a dial-up connection and was afraid I would be disconnected from the internet). It was during these final moments that the real bidding began and the dollar amounts rose quickly. I put in a bid and a proxy that I was sure would provide enough cushion to win the bowl. As the final seconds came, I rushed to place an even higher proxy. Ebay auctions end at an exact time. Bids are not accepted after that set time. I am not sure if this is good or bad for the sellers or buyers. I do know that it wreaks havoc on your nerves and stomach if the item is something you are determined to acquire. I refreshed the screen one last time and noticed that the auction had ended. I scanned the screen to see if my moniker was in the winners box. It was. Whew! I was relieved that it was over, but having not seen the piece in hand, I was still not exactly sure what I had just won.

The package arrived by FedEx. I opened the box and was immediately overcome with immense satisfaction and giddy delight. The bowl was everything that I wanted it to be. The form, figure, and feel were sublime. It was a “su-burl-ative!”

It was a perfect object and I was privileged to own it. However, the label on the bottom haunted me. Written on an old jelly label in brown faded ink was “Property of W.G. Blunt. Deposited as a loan.” In blue ink, “ADEC” and “272.4” were recorded. My first thought was of the Portsmouth, New Hampshire folk art painter, John S. Blunt. Were W. G. and John S. related? I contacted the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco to see if they had any information. Within a few days I received a fax of the transcribed and computerized record for the sugar bowl.



Fig. 2/a. Detail of label on bottom of sugar bowl.

The record indicated that the museum, then the de Young Museum, or Golden Gate Park Museum, received the sugar bowl on Saturday, November 22, 1902, from a William G. Blunt. It also indicated that the piece originated from, “New Hampshire, Bedfo[rd].”

I immediately found all the reference material that I could on John S. Blunt. Bedford is only 50 miles from Portsmouth. How many Blunts could there have been in New Hampshire? As it turned out, many. From my genealogical research on-line, I could not make any connection to W. G. Blunt and John S. Blunt. Nina Fletcher Little wrote an article, “J. S. Blunt New England Landscape Painter” for *The Magazine Antiques* in September, 1948, and provided some insights as well as a loose genealogy. John S. Blunt came from an important New England family. Of John S. Blunt’s relatives, probably the most famous was Edmund March Blunt, who wrote *COAST PILOT* (which was *the* navigational handbook of the day). Also, a John Blunt IV, either a great uncle or great grandfather (the genealogy is confusing) was credited with having navigated George Washington across the Delaware, December 25, 1776.

I speculated that such a prominent family would have a well recorded genealogy.

I contacted the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now Historic New England) to see if they had Ms. Little’s research archives for the article and/or a comprehensive genealogy on John. S. Blunt. They could not locate any such material, however they did come up with a listing of the probate records that Ms. Little had made mention of in her article. Since John S. Blunt died in Boston, Massachusetts, I contacted the Massachusetts Archives to research his probate records. I was hoping to find that his will or house assets mentioned a wooden sugar bowl. It was a long shot, but these types of articles were commonly listed in early probate documents. The estate of John S. Blunt, however, did not list any such bowl. I looked up COAST PILOT by Edmund March Blunt and saw that the revised editions were published by Edmund and George William Blunt. My Blunt was William G., but I knew that names were often repeated within a family and often the middle name of one is the first of an elder in the family. So my focus went to George William Blunt. I was able to find out that he was a son of Edmund, but little else. Another dead end.

It was also at this time that I learned there was a Point Blunt on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. William G. lived in San Francisco—there had to be some connection. An e-mail from the Angel Island Association soon informed me that Point Blunt was named after Simon F Blunt, USN during the Civil War. It was never a commissioned military post and was abandoned after the war. No other information on Simon F. Blunt was known. So Point Blunt was not named after my Blunt. But could he and Simon be related?

I contacted the FAMSF again and asked if the original registration or catalogue books may have additional information that was not transcribed onto the computer’s registration file. Within a few days Jane Glover of the museum sent me photocopies of the original documents. They did provide some additional insight. Under the header, “*Character of Object*,” the bowl was listed as “Antique about the time of the Revolution.”

Catalogue of the Loan Collections in the						Golden Gate Park Museum, San Francisco, Cal.				
Museum Number	Original Number	NAME	CHARACTER OF OBJECT	LOCALITY	RECEIVED FROM	COLLECTED BY	When Received	Status of Object	REMARKS	
271	2196	Porcelain	Decorative Sugar	London, E. I.	William G. Blunt	George W. Blunt	Aug 2, 1902	Loan	OUT - SEE ENTRY ON FILE 271	
272	2307	Sugar Bowl (wood)	Antique, about the time of the Revolution	Redford, N. H.	W. G. Blunt	George W. Blunt	Nov 22, 1902	Loan	see 271	
273	2308	Porcelain	Made of shell by Pierre Juste	Paris, Co. Cal.	Paris Columbian Museum	George W. Blunt	July 2, 1902	Loan	see 271	

Fig. 2/b. Composite of original entry of sugar bowl into the Golden Gate Park Museum (de Young). Courtesy FAMSF

The genealogical research became confusing and disappointing. Keeping track of all of those Blunts, most of whom had the same names repeated over generations, taxed my brain. I needed some professional assistance. I contacted John Flora of Ancestry Experts Inc. in the San Francisco Bay area. I explained my situation and goals to Mr. Flora. I wanted to identify W. G. Blunt and trace his ancestry against that of John S. Blunt and to see if there was a connection. Flora said that the first place to start was an obituary or death record, that either of these would likely mention his parents or some family members that could be used to begin a backwards trace.

While Flora searched for the death records, I began looking through old San Francisco city directories in the New York Public Library. Since the sugar bowl was deposited into the museum in 1902, I started there. I quickly located a William G. Blunt, Taxidermist, 738 Market Street, San

Francisco and found that he remained listed for several years. However, in the 1915 directory I saw a listing for two William G. Blunts, neither of whom were listed as a taxidermist. One was a carpenter and the other a curator of the Golden Gate Park Museum (de Young Museum). The 1916 directory cleared up the confusion. Though both Blunts were listed, the one at the Golden Gate Museum was further identified as a taxidermist.

I e-mailed Jane Glover at the FAMSF and informed her that it appeared that a William G. Blunt, taxidermist was a former curator at the museum and asked if they may have an old employee file for Mr. Blunt. After checking into it she found that a William G. Blunt was referenced as being the Curator of Natural History for the museum some time after 1907. It was not known when he retired or left the museum, but she did confirm that it was indeed this William G. Blunt that deposited the sugar bowl in 1902 and that he donated a number of other items to the museum in its early history.

Through a statewide search of death records, John Flora located the death record of William G. Blunt. However, he was quick to note that the death record provided little information such as the names of his parents or his birth city. It did however give the birth date of September x, 1830, and a birth state, Massachusetts. The date of his death was June 25th, 1919. Flora then found his obituary in the June 26th, *San Francisco Chronicle*. Disappointingly it did not provide us with his family information, but mentioned that he was a “native of Boston, Mass.” John S. Blunt had moved to Boston in the early 1800’s. This information gave us another Boston based Blunt.

Mr. Flora did additional research on the Blunt families of New England and found that there were several, all seeming to relate back to a William Blunt from England, who settled in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1634. Though there were what looked like a lot of supporting ties, there was nothing conclusive that our William G. was related to John S. Blunt, folk art painter of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

After some time and a few more dead ends, Mr. Flora found this in the 1873 Great Register of Voters:

<u>Reg. Date</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Nativity</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Local Residence</u>
8/3/1867	Blunt, William Greenleaf	28	Mass.	Machinist	1112 Stockton
8/1/1866	Blunt, John Patten	23	Mass.	Clerk	1112 Stockton
7/10/1866	Blunt, Phineas Underwood	56	N. Hamps.	Ins. Customs	112 [sic]Stockton

This was our first matching record of a William G. Blunt born in Massachusetts. Given the age of Phineas and that they all resided at the same address, Flora theorized that Phineas was the father and William and John were brothers. Flora turned to the city directories to confirm that this was our William G. Blunt. William was listed consistently throughout the 1870’s, first as a machinist, then a naturalist, and then as a taxidermist. This was our William G. Blunt—William Greenleaf Blunt. Flora then traced the whole family through the directories from 1870-1919 (the time of William’s death). He noticed that a Susan Blunt was listed in the 1894-5 directory, that Phineas Underwood Blunt dropped out after the 1895-6 directory and that Susan was listed as a widow in the 1897-8 directory. Flora began to focus on obtaining the death notice of Phineas Underwood Blunt, but crossed his fingers as he knew that most of the official records for that period were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake.



Fig. 2/c. Sketch of Phineas U. Blunt.  
San Francisco Call, Jan. 4 1897, p. 9.

Flora turned up a number of documents. Phineas Underwood Blunt was a member of the Society of California Pioneers (SCP). From the SCP “Biographical Sketch” written on the occasion of his death, Mr. Flora learned a wealth of information. Phineas’ exact birth date was July 27, 1809 and his birth place was Auburn, New Hampshire (Auburn is just 12 miles east of Bedford). He also learned that Susan was indeed his wife and she was identified as “Susan Patton of Bedford, New Hampshire.” However complete, the article made no mention of his parents. Flora located a couple other documents relating to Phineas Blunt, however none provided any additional family information. An obituary provided a sketch of Mr. Blunt (Fig. 2/c).

Flora alerted me of his findings. A Bedford, New Hampshire connection had been established! I informed him of a book that I was aware of, *THE DIARY OF MATTHEW PATTEN OF BEDFORD, N.H. FROM 1754 TO 1788*. Though the spelling of Patten was different than the one cited in the information from Phineas’ obituary, we felt that the odds were in our favor that it was a spelling error and worthy of investigation.

I bought a copy of the book from Picton Press and poured through the entire diary in one (very) long sitting. By page 13, I was beside myself. Matthew Patten writes:

*"March 19, 1755: Charles Emerson Brought me home 11 Dishes he Turned for me and he Charged me 2-0-0 four shillings of which I had paid him before and went and got 3 knots up at Gan Riddels."*

Knots are any early term for burls.

On page 24, in the entry from January 7, 1756, Matthew writes:

*"... and went to Merrimac and paid Phineas Underwood, 19-17-8 old Tenor. ..."*

Phineas Underwood! 1756? Merrimack? My Phineas was born in 1809 in Auburn. Oh, but wait, this was “Phineas Underwood,” not “Phineas Underwood Blunt.” My head was reeling. I took a moment and did a quick Google search on Phineas Underwood of Merrimack, New Hampshire. I learned that he was the town clerk of Merrimack but little else. Nothing tied him to Phineas Underwood Blunt or to my sugar bowl.

I continued pouring through the diary and looked for mentions of familiar names, “knot dishes,” or anything else that may shed some light.

Matthew Patten was born in Ireland on May 19, 1719. His parents were part of the great Scots-Irish migration to New Hampshire of the early 18th century. They moved to Bedford in 1728. Matthew was known as a joiner by trade, though in reading his diaries, one finds that he was a farmer, a land surveyor, a judge of probate, and a justice of the peace. His diaries are one of the most complete accounts of early New England life. The diaries are not exactly diaries as we regard the term today, rather they are referred to as "day books." They are more an accounting of credits and debits to local merchants and neighbors. This was very much a time of barter and trade and most men held written accounts of their transactions. The entries rarely express any careful thoughts on daily life or worldly events. If mention of an event is made it is very straight forward and usually absent of emotion. Taken on their own, the daily entries tell us very little of life in a burgeoning country. However, these daily accounts taken over the course of a few years or in the case of Matthew Pattens, decades, they paint a clear picture of life as an immigrant tradesman/farmer in 18th century America. They also paint a picture of the birth and growth of a typical small American town. Of the many aspects that are overtly different from the way most of us live our lives today, we learn that in small towns everyone knew each other (literally everyone) and worked close together to build and sustain their community. One becomes exhausted reading his accounts of never ending labor: getting up at the crack of dawn and tending to the farm; setting out for the day to go to the next town to get a wheel or to buy flour and beans by the barrel; mending broken tools; turning dishes on a pole lathe; fishing and salting the catch; plowing the fields; cutting timber from fields for personal use, resale or trade.

The day books cover the full period of the Revolutionary War and it was interesting to check up on his entries to see if or how events were recorded. For the Battle of Lexington and Concord, "The shot heard round the world" he writes:

*April 20, 1775, "I Recd the Melancholy news in the morning that General Gages troops had fired on our Countrymen at Concord yesterday and had killed a large number of them our town was notified last night. . . ."*

In a rare but still understated record, Matthew emotes on June 21, 1776:

*" I came home and went to writing letters to Crown Point for on my journey down I got an account of my Johns Death of the Small Pox at Canada. . . He was shot through the left arm at Bunker Hill fight and now was lead after suffering much fategue to the place where he now lyes in defending the just Rights of America to whose end he came in the prime of life by means of that wicked Tyranical Brute (Nea worse than Brute) of Great Britain he was 24 years and 31 days old. "*

John Patten, eldest son of Matthew Patten, was a lieutenant in the army. After this account there is very little mention of the war.

As I read the book, I made note of several intriguing passages. Matthew writes several accounts of picking up “a knot for a dish.” I knew Matthew was a joiner and he makes mention of making window sashes and bits of furniture. However up until now nothing puts him at a lathe. At this point it appeared that his friend Charles Emerson was the local wood turner.

April 10, 1766, he writes: *"I turned two sets of Table legs."*

So Matthew can turn!

June 29, 1767: *"...I borrowed Alexr McCollums Hooks and Mandrell for Turning Dishes."*

The next day, June 30th: *"I began to try to turn Dishes."*

I surmised that turning dishes is a different skill than turning a table leg.

July 10, 1767: *"I turned some Dishes and took my plough irons to Daniel Moor...."*

Success!

It should be noted that the word dish in those days was not a plate as we think of the word today. A dish was any small vessel for food service. As in Matthew's entry for August 17, 1769:

*"I turned a knot dish that holds about 2 quarts in the forenoon...."*

This entry is also his first mention of turning a piece of burl.

Aside from another mention of turning dishes on February 17th, 1773, he does not mention any knots or turnings for another 7 years. On December 12th and 20th of 1780 he mentions collecting two “ash knots.” These are also his last entries that specifically mention knots.

Then, I read of Matthew's sugar dish! He records on March 13, 1781:

*"I paid Mrs Chandler a pound of Coffee I borrowed from her a fortnight or three weeks ago and I borrowed the full of our Shugar dish of shugar from her."*

Upon finishing the book, I felt that Matthew Patten was my man. That the sugar bowl was no longer the Blunt's, but now of the Patten's of Bedford, New Hampshire. I informed John Flora of my findings, that Matthew Patten was a turner, that he turned burl bowls and even mentions a sugar bowl. John went back to work on the genealogy and looked to see if there was a connection to our Susan Patton and this Matthew Patten (both of Bedford, New Hampshire). We switched from researching the paternal side of William Greenleaf Blunt to the maternal side. I anxiously awaited his findings.

John familiarized himself with Matthew Patten's diary and then located *HISTORY OF BEDFORD, NEW HAMPSHIRE FROM 1737*. Finally a break! This history provided a detailed account of the Honorable Matthew Patten and his important contributions to the building of the town. The book also contained a Patten family genealogy. Matthew and wife Elizabeth had 11 children: six boys and five girls. One son, Alexander Patten (born January 9, 1765), married Lydia Atwood and had nine children. Alexander's and Lydia's third child, Susannah, was born September 27, 1803, and married Phineas Underwood Blunt of Boston, Massachusetts. They had five children, two of which lived in San Francisco, California—William Greenleaf and John Patten. After more than two years of on and off research, we finally had a direct lineage and connection!

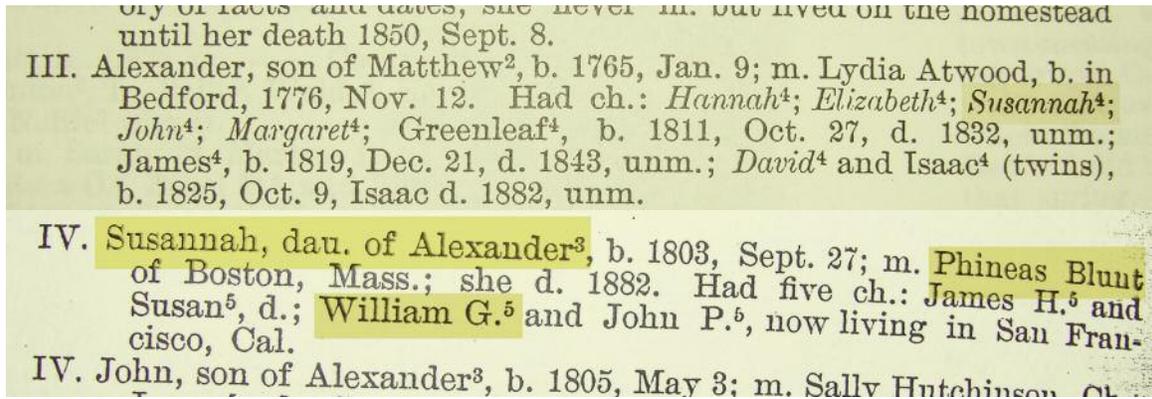


Fig. 2/d. From, *HISTORY OF BEDFORD, NEW HAMPSHIRE FROM 1737*, pages 1039-1040.

The maple burl sugar bowl deposited into the de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco in 1902 by William Greenleaf Blunt was part of a family legacy. It was the sugar bowl of his great-grandparents, Matthew and Elizabeth Patten of Bedford, New Hampshire.



Fig. 2/e. Matthew Patten's House, Bedford, New Hampshire from a 19th century slide courtesy of The Bedford Historical Society. (Sadly the house was destroyed in the early 20th century.)

Sarah and Polly Patten, daughters of Matthew and Elizabeth, were keenly aware of their family's importance to the history of Bedford. In about 1850 Sarah and Polly entrusted the bound papers of their father to Dr. Peter P. Woodbury. In 1903 the town of Bedford appropriated \$500.00 to have the diaries transcribed and published.

Elizabeth and Matthew Patten were pioneers of the American East. And their granddaughter, Susan Patten, along with her husband, Phineas Underwood Blunt, and their children, were pioneers of the West. Susan's son, William Greenleaf Blunt, recognized this and was proud of his family's colonizing history and donated a humble heirloom, a maple burl sugar bowl, to his local museum as a testament to their stake in settling this country.

Assuredly it can be said that the the maple burl sugar bowl illustrated herein is from the Matthew Patten family of Bedford, New Hampshire. Further, it may very well be the "Shugar Dish" mentioned in his diaries and quite possibly the only known craftwork by Matthew Patten.



Pl. 2/2. Bedford, New Hampshire Maple Burl Sugar Bowl

Circa: 1760-1780

Size: 5" D x 4 1/8" H

Collection: Peter Brams, Jackson Heights, NY

**Provenance:** Matthew & Elizabeth Patten, Bedford, NH  
Alexander & Lydia Patten, Bedford, NH  
Phineas Underwood & Susannah Patten Blunt, San Francisco, CA  
William Greenleaf & Rachel Berthe Blunt, San Francisco, CA  
de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, CA  
Walter Daniels & Mary Louise Beecroft, San Francisco, CA  
Steve Powers, Brooklyn, NY